

A WHOLE DIFFERENT BALL GAME

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Under the circumstances, it was, to say the least, the most surprising display of unbridled—and unexpected—joy that I have seen in some time. The setting was the Little League World Series game between Aruba and Chinese Taipei in Williamsport, PA. It was last Saturday afternoon that the game took place. I happened to be working out at the gym and noticed the unfolding drama on one of the television screens.

The Chinese Taipei team assumed an insurmountable lead as the game progressed, eventually amassing twenty runs. Now, keep in mind that the Little League World Series stage is about as pressured packed as life can get for an eleven or twelve year old boy. This is for all the marbles, as they say and it is played out in front of huge crowds and a national television audience. So, it must have been a huge shock and disappointed for the Aruba team to suddenly find itself hopelessly behind in this elimination game. And, for a while, there were looks of stunned disbelief and even some tears of frustration and perhaps, embarrassment. This was a dream that was rapidly becoming a nightmare!

But then, quietly, unexpectedly, there was a shift in attitude and demeanor. A coach stepped up and simply reminded the boys of what really mattered in the moment—and it wasn't about winning the game, but simply about playing the game as best they could with as much joy as they could muster. And the result was surprising to say the least.

There was the left fielder who began to dance with exuberance as he awaited the next pitch to be thrown. There were the cheers and words of encouragement from one player to another as the game wore on. By the time the last inning arrived, Aruba was trailing 20-0. But still this team did not waver in its determination to play the game. They continued to play with passion and energy. As their last at bat unfolded, they began to get some hits and those hits were suddenly translated into one run and then another and finally, another. And joy reigned supreme! They were still 17 runs behind, but that did not prevent them from leaping into their teammates' arms, pumping their fists, shouting and celebrating the moment. They had scored! They were on the board! And life was good!!

And their witness of enthusiasm and joy was not lost upon the crowd or, for that matter, the national television audience. As I watched between work outs, I found myself a bit transfixed by their exuberance and strangely moved by joy. This was the game as it was meant to be played. There was, of course, no miracle comeback. The final score stood at 20-3. But you would have never known it by the way these young men from Aruba conducted themselves. No tears...no tantrums...no sullen looks or limp congratulatory

handshakes to the victors. Just joy, exuberant, passionate joy, life giving joy. It was enough to make me want to believe, one again, in that old adage that it's not whether you win or lose, but it's how you play the game.

We, of course, live in a culture that has a pretty well defined way of playing the game—whatever the game or activity or business happens to be. Ours is a culture that seems to pride itself on being the best—whatever it takes to do so. It's all about being #1. It's all about excellence and about being at the top, about being in the lead. It's all about getting the edge on the competition and then keeping it.

Our celebrities are so often those who have managed to do that, those who have been able to defeat the competition and stand alone in the winner's circle. And while there is something to be said for the drama of human competition with its thrill of victory and its agony of defeat, it can also be said that far too often, we are far too focused on winning at all costs—so much so that we have forgotten how to play in favor of our choice to compete.

As you no doubt have noticed, our children are playing less and less even as they learn to compete more and more. When I was young, sandlot baseball, our neighborhood pick-up games were a vital part of our summer experience. But when is the last time that you witnessed a game of either softball or baseball that wasn't a part of an organized league or structured schedule? I'm sure that they still happen—but not nearly as often as might be needed. We are a people who have, at least in some respects, forgotten how to play for the simple joy, the pure pleasure of play itself and I don't think I need to even mention that we are the poorer for it.

Maybe that's why the team from Aruba has managed to capture the attention so many people. Maybe their simple choice to play with passion and joy has served to remind us of what we may have lost in the hard fought competitions of our lives. Maybe, for just a fleeting moment, they have managed somehow to penetrate the hard shell of our competitive edge with the simple witness that suggests that it is when we play, truly lose ourselves in play, that we find ourselves, that is to say that we learn a very important lesson in what it means to be fully human.

Can you remember the last time that you truly played? Can you remember what it felt like to lose yourself in the moment without being worried about your performance or how you might measure up to the competition? One of my seminary friends used to say, "You are who you are when you play." And I think that he was absolutely right. We are who we are when we play. There is no pretense, no posturing, no concern over our image or whether others might regard us as winners or losers. No, we are too busy playing to be too concerned with ourselves. And that, I think, is an excellent prescription for improved mental health.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus has the audacity to suggest that children and their playful approach to life hold the key that unlocks the door to the kingdom of God. ***“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”*** Now that’s a pretty incredible statement, don’t you think? What do you suppose he meant by that? Any ideas?

I’m inclined to think that, being a student of the human condition, Jesus understood only too well that so often, we are our own worst enemies. I think Jesus understood that we can become so weighted down with our own importance, so pre-occupied with our own schedules and agenda, so overwhelmed with our worries and anxieties, that we forget what it means to be fully present in the moment and what it means, therefore, to be fully human.

But a child at play doesn’t have that problem. A child at play is fully present in the moment and is, therefore, less guarded and more open to experiencing that moment in all of its fullness and joy. By citing the example of a child, Jesus was merely illustrating that the kingdom of God—the reign of God’s grace and love—will never be experienced by those too busy to notice, those too preoccupied with their own self-importance to pay attention. No, it will only makes its presence known in the lives of those who don’t allow themselves and their egos to get in the way. They are open and receptive—much like a child at play.

In this day and age of celebrity sports stars and pampered, high paid athletes, there is a baseball player that I have recently become aware of a young man who serves to remind us all of what it means to simply play for the love of the game. His name is Josiah Vierra and you may have come across his story on ESPN or, more recently, on Youtube. Josiah is a young man of seven years of age who is suffering from Progeria, the aging disease that will likely end his life by age twelve or thirteen. But this prognosis, as serious as it is, and the battle for his health that Josiah has already waged, has not for one moment dampened his love for the game of baseball and the simple joy of circling the bases.

I would like to share a condensed version of Josiah’s story and allow him to offer his own rather unique and powerful witness... (Show Youtube Clip on Josiah Vierra / 2:59)

It is a premise of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Church at Corinth that God has chosen to use what the world deems foolishness as the means for demonstrating the wisdom and power of God. He was, of course, referring to the so called foolishness of Christ crucified and the victory that was gained in the midst of apparent defeat. But this teaching is not limited in its application to the crucifixion alone. Indeed, it illustrates what has become known as the paradox of the gospel—namely that in defeat there is victory, in weakness there is strength and in that which the world deems foolishness, there is the wisdom and power of God.

What we experience in the witness of Josiah Vierra is nothing less, I believe, than the simple paradox that in the weakness of this little boy held in the grips of this awful disease, there is a strength and power and beauty that stands to remind us all of what really matters in life...

And it's not what our culture so often would have us believe. It's really not about winning, about being number one, about being the best. No, it's about the simple love of the game—whatever the game happens to be. It's about playing with passion, about being fully present to the moment without missing the opportunity to experience the simple joy that comes when we lose ourselves. For it is then that we truly find ourselves. It is then that we gain a glimpse of what the kingdom of God is really like. And that, you see, is a whole different ball game. Amen.